adventures

collective tales of unusual and exciting, typically hazardous, experiences or activities
“Discussing and sharing experiences in gestures of mutual solidarity and support leads to greater understanding and respect; and discovery of the new surely leads to wonder, astonishment and admiration, rather than antipathy, and hopefully makes us less likely to hate or demonise one against another.”

(Martland, 2006)
In preparation for a brand new interdisciplinary arts MA (which started both full-time and part-time in autumn 2007), the Centre for Excellence in the Creative and Performing Arts (NI) trialled a module ‘Adventures in Interdisciplinarity’ between November 2006 and March 2007.

This trial project included four intensive task-focused practice-based weekend Adventures spread across this five-month period where a group of potential MA students aged between 21 and 52 and from a wide range of arts backgrounds collaborated with professional practitioners of local, national and international standing to explore making work in an interdisciplinary context.

The 18-strong group met with the artist on a Friday lunchtime and by the end of Saturday they had created a performance, an installation or a presentational pitch or something else...

Leading the Adventures were Kate Rowlands from the BBC Writersroom, visual artist Paul Murnaghan, the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen’s and founders of Welfare State International, John Fox and Sue Gill.

The BBC writersroom identifies and champions new writing talent and diversity across BBC Drama, Entertainment and Children’s programmes. They invest in new writing projects nationwide and build creative partnerships, including work with theatres, writers’ organisations and film agencies across the country. Kate led the group through a programme ideas development process and, by the end of the second day they were pitching ideas showing roughs on digital video and DAT recordings.
The Sonic Arts Research Centre is a newly established facility within Queen’s University Belfast. Uniting internationally recognized experts in the fields of music, electronic engineering and computer science, this unique interdisciplinary centre features a 20-person research team and a state-of-the-art sonic laboratory.

This auditorium is a highly innovative structure allowing sound to be moved throughout the space, and is the only fully 3D studio of its kind for sonic art performance and experimentation. After a whistle-stop tour of some sound software, the students created a soundtrack for the first minute of the film “Delicatessen” and, the next day, developed performance pieces using computer technology and the human voice.
The third adventure was led by conceptual artist Paul Murnaghan. Paul’s practice reveals a fascination with the psychology of individual and collective memory, in particular the artifice of reminiscence and the social and cultural conditions that contribute to specific belief systems. He has exhibited extensively nationally and internationally and was Artistic Director / Curator of 5th Gallery at Guinness Storehouse, Dublin, for its existence (2000-03).

Working in the former Northern Bank building in the centre of Belfast, Paul was the catalyst for the creation of a unique site-specific installation around notions of personal memory.
The final adventure was led by John Fox and Sue Gill who set up and ran Welfare State International (which was regarded as Britain’s ‘foremost alternative performance and installation collective’ – The Guardian) for 40 years before they began again in a new incarnation as Dead Good Guides, inventing prototypes of participatory art, carnival theatre, site-specific events, sculptural installations, lantern festivals and ceremonies for new rites of passage.

They worked with the students to create around notions of time producing a performance piece fusing primitive and complex technologies.

Anna Newell, Artistic Director
The journey began on a cold, dark Autumn evening when 20 hopeful travellers got together in the Postgraduate Centre at Queen’s University to learn about the Adventures ahead. It struck me that evening that such a diverse group of Adventurers would have interesting tales to recount as they travelled through the days to come:

“It’s really going to be so interesting to see how the group works – how individuals behave and how they articulate their feelings and experiences of the project. It might be good to select a few willing bodies and do a sort of Canterbury Tales I suppose the best way is to ask them.”

(Diary entry, November 2006).

These stories are very personal accounts of aspects of the journeys undertaken by some of my fellow travellers through the interdisciplinary adventures that followed. Some of the tales were given to me in writing, others were collected through recorded interviews. In all cases I have kept any editing to a minimum in an attempt to preserve the personal experiences, responses, thoughts, feelings and voices of the individual contributors.

What strikes me above all as I re-read these stories is the transformational nature of these intensive, immersive learning experiences. Artistic Director, Anna Newell has developed a pedagogy that combines “absolute rigour with absolute fun”; during our Adventures, we experienced that powerful combination, together with moments of elation and moments of frustration and even, at times, of despair as we struggled with new and challenging concepts.

My fellow travellers tell of fundamental changes in their thinking, understanding, feelings and aesthetic responses. All of us, in some way, know ourselves a little better as a result of our journey through these Adventures.

Sarah Marshall
October 2007
the travellers

The Artistic Director
For the 16 years prior to her position as Artistic Director, Anna was a freelance theatre director, directing professional and community projects in Scotland and beyond. During which time, she has also set up and led large-scale women’s community acapella harmony singing groups in Dundee and Belfast. As an undeniably small and playful person, she staunchly retains the right to have the longest, dullest bio.

The Educational Developer
Sarah Marshall is Senior Educational Developer at Queen’s University, Belfast. She participated fully as a student in the trial of “Adventures in Interdisciplinarity”, an experimental module which is now part of the new Interdisciplinary Arts MA pathways at Queen’s.

The Apprentice Writer
Samantha McCaffrey is an apprentice writer and Bob Dylan fan who wants to be in the world and be able to write about it at the same time. She would rather be travelling round Belfast on a bus than sitting behind a desk writing all day long.

The Filmmaker
Conan McIvor is an MA Film and Visual Studies Student at Queen’s University; he was recently awarded the Bill Miskelly Award by Northern Ireland Screen. He writes everything important on Post-it notes that he inevitably loses.

The Illustrator
Patrick Sanders is a freelance arts worker in Belfast. He uses illustration as a documentation tool and is currently working to illustrate personal stories from the queer community in Northern Ireland.

The Choreographer
Stevie Prickett is a choreographer and dancer who is still on a learning journey. His participation in interdisciplinary work has provided him with new challenges and fresh ideas which he hopes will continue to keep his approach and his work interesting.

The Composer
Will McConnell is a recent graduate of the Film Studies BA at Queen’s University. He is a self-confessed filmmaker, with delusions of grandeur and a bloated vocabulary. A former iconoclast and general troublemaker he is currently restoring his faith in images, as a practising film-type-person, graphic artist and painter.
I realise that sometimes I need physical space and silence and to work alone. I find sometimes managing a group dynamic and other people’s voices very difficult, especially with new things. I suppose I have learned a bit more about how I work as a person. I was conscious that maybe different types of creativity, acting and performance for example, work really well with that group dynamic, but I struggled.

Maybe it’s because, with my writing, I’m an incubator, so things don’t come suddenly. Ideas often come to me when I’m walking, when I’m quiet. I don’t like the idea of sitting down to write, to order. That’s kind of depressing; there’s too much world out there. I’m a person that needs to be quiet, and that means alone, and it means creating space to let that incubation happen.

In the BBC Adventure, we all got ideas, but what I found interesting was that we all had different ideas. And I knew they just weren’t interested in my ideas. Everyone was being very nice and nodding politely, but you just knew, in the same way that you knew that none of their ideas were exciting me.

So actually, after two hours, I got to the point where I became practical, and said I just loved their ideas. At that first session we were wearing our nice-people’s masks, and I could hear myself saying “could we just do something”, then almost shouting, “now will we just do something”, because although I wasn’t enthusiastic to facilitate a group, I eventually throught “let’s just make some decisions”. So, forget me as a writer, it was also just as a person, “come on let’s move”. And I just think that’s sometimes what happens.
You’ve got different people with different voices; different languages all going at once, like a giraffe and a gazelle, a lion maybe and an elephant. There are different types of writers, so one of my teachers is very academic. He’s the type of person who has read three books on the train, can quote from all over the place and he’s a very different type of writer than I am. But I still seem to learn from him, but it just takes a while, if you know what I mean, and a lot of it goes over my head. The Trial Module was similar in that, in lots of the Adventures, I was being exposed to all these new people with different types of voices and then trying to find my own.

It was the same in our group at SARC because I knew Conan didn’t love the Bob Dylan I had brought, and Sarah had her lovely poem. I just didn’t want to be pushing it, and then we were all being very nice. Also, I liked Sarah’s poem, the poem about snow, and I loved it and I suppose I wanted to do it all. Conan had had an idea that was lovely as well. Then I remember Sarah saying that we couldn’t do the three, and I thought, well, why can’t we? Then I whispered to myself, “just going to let it go, it’s fine.” There were those two kinds of feelings, wanting to get heard in the group and then also liking the other ideas. It was really hard to know how to get through this as new people working together.

That’s what I liked about the fourth session with John Fox. All of us were really much more comfortable with each other and I think that definitely struck me. I felt much less nervous, more settled. At the beginning that’s just what it is, it’s a beginning, and people are nervous. I do think you can be creative both as individuals and as groups and that both are valuable even within a collaborative process.
The Paul Murnaghan weekend at the old Northern Bank was probably the most challenging for me. Day 1 I was lost. Completely lost! I arrived late and then I felt we were just kind of abandoned and not really given any direction or any brief to work with. It was just “go away and do something”, and I wanted to know how to do it, or see some examples of what we were thinking about. So at the end of the first day I just felt completely lost and didn’t know what was going on. And I didn’t really have any ideas until I came back on the Saturday and actually found a space and I thought, well, OK, now what can I do?

And I actually enjoyed Saturday once we got in there and started doing stuff, once we had all had an evening away and a chance to think about what was in there. Because I know, for me, that Friday I was making origami shirts and making paper money, and I think that was because we were in a bank and we were told to make something. Whereas I think we were more used to the space on the second day and we’d actually all picked somewhere individual. I think because we’d done that and then gone home to think about it, we could actually think about what that space could do and what the space was about. People definitely got more of an idea of what they were going to do once they had decided on a space, rather than trying to come up with the art first and then find somewhere to put it, to actually start with the location and work from there was easier.
Although I struggled to understand it, I think this was art, in terms of how broad the use of the word ‘art’ can be. And I think everybody had a really clear idea of what we were doing, that there was a reason behind what we were doing and everybody seemed to have come up with a concept they wanted to work with. It wasn’t just random. Everybody kind of sought something and went with it. And I think everybody’s work actually said something. I don’t think there was anything that was superficial or inconsequential; everything had something behind it and you could look at the work and understand it without being too conceptual.

Something that I personally have issue with in my own work, and in a lot of the work that happens, is that sometimes art, in all its forms, can be quite off-putting for its audience. And I think you can be accessible while retaining some integrity; art doesn’t need to be ‘dumbed down’ just so that people can understand it.

I think that in the Northern Bank everybody made something that was accessible in some way, and I think that’s important, that audiences can engage with a work of art. I don’t see the point in making something that alienates your audience. I struggle with that quite a lot. I think by the end of the Saturday we’d all managed to do something that you could go round and look at, and read something into it or get something out of it. So that was my experience of the Bank!

SP
I really enjoyed the Paul Murnaghan weekend in the old Nothern Bank building and I loved the idea of making art that could be interactive, creating an environment that someone could walk into. I had two ideas, which, in the end I was able to link stylistically. My first idea was to create an environment where I could re-create a sensory experience that I had when I was at college. It was the first time I had ever had a Thornton’s Viennese Truffle. I know this sounds hilarious, but it was a really striking experience.

It was a grey, wet day in Wakefield where I was studying. I was on my way somewhere in the morning, and it was all a bit grim, so I thought I’d buy some chocolate. I saw these Viennese Truffles, sugar-encrusted balls, thought, well, I’ve never had one, so … I bit into it and what I realised later was that it was a sort of vanilla flavour, but what happened was that I was immediately transported back to growing up in Portstewart and walking along the promenade or the beach with and ice cream and the scent of seaweed, sand and the ocean. It was just one of the most amazing sensory experiences that I ever had. I’ve never had it since, but it really felt literal – it was incredible.

So I wanted to re-create this in my own rudimentary way. There were two rooms under the stairs, one of them with room to sit in. I covered it in coloured sheets and put a little bowl of Viennese Truffles in there.
There was a stereo and a light switch, and instructions, like a recipe, saying that you had to take a Viennese Truffle, put it in your mouth, turn off the light and then turn on the stereo. The sound was a recording made in the middle of an empty room. So there was all this white noise that wasn’t literally the sea but it suggested a wide space which was in complete contrast to the under-the-stairs environment.

The other room was a walk-in electricity cupboard, with a slatted door, like a locker or a chalet door. Paul had said that sometimes the best art you create is when you take the risk of putting in something about yourself that you’re almost afraid of people finding out. I had been in a long-term relationship and we had separated about 18 months earlier. That seemed like something of myself that I could put in. So I took real conversations, things that were said during the separation from my partner; not hostile things, but really personal things. I typed them out in Braille and stuck them all over the room. The title of the piece was ‘Sorry I made you cry’ and people were invited to go in, to turn off the light and to feel the Braille. There was also a mobile phone on which I had recorded various people just saying the word ‘hello’. So there was this idea of communication.

I was really pleased with the environment, and the idea that they would go from that claustrophobic space into the one with the chocolates. So it was about using the darkness and the sound and the senses but making them very different spaces. To somehow link the two pieces stylistically, I had also put the Braille machine in the room with the chocolates and I’d painted and cut out some Braille cards to look like waves coming out the top of it.

PS

“I was immediately transported back to growing up”
I think what most amazed me during the Adventures was the work that Conan and I did on the Simon Armitage poem, (Armitage, 1999) which was filmed. Film is something that I love, but it always seems to me like something that is such a long, involved process.

In the space of three hours to perform it, then perform it again as the sound wasn’t good enough the first time, so to perform twice and then for Conan to go away and edit it into a really enjoyable and strong piece that was ready to show – that was extraordinary.

What I learned most from that was that digital media can be used creatively at the same quick pace, at the same scale and to the same deadlines as other art forms. I know that, as an illustrator, I could have drawn something fairly quickly, in the space of time that we had; I know that I could work with people and we could put together a performance in a few hours.

But it really amazed me that you could take something that was, to me, so complicated, and create a finished technological piece.
The theme of that weekend was ‘time’ and this was just one of the things we came up with. Conan and I were given this extract from ‘Killing Time’ by Simon Armitage (1999), which really has a pace of its own and is very much about the kinds of things we were exploring: time and memory, time passing, wasting time, keeping hold of time, having time. That was probably the weekend where we all did the most, the widest variety of things. I think everyone did, maybe 2 or 3 or 4 different things over the course of the weekend. So, for instance, I’d already made a wood cut and people had made drawings and we had constructed a short drama, so lots of creative work had already been put together.

We took the poem away at about 4 o’clock. I looked over it and practised reading it and we talked about what to do. It seemed to me that the poem naturally picked up pace, and we came up with the idea of keeping it visually very simple. So we used quite still shots of me reading it, and Conan would focus on my eyes, focus on my ears, focus on my mouth – with just the muscles of my face moving. So I read it, he filmed it and edited it into a sequence, and at 7 o’clock, we projected it on to this large, white curtain in the rehearsal room, as part of a showcase of ‘work in progress’ in which we produced a collection of work, using different media to express our ideas on the theme of time.

PS
When I started the aptly named ‘Adventures in Interdisciplinarity’, I had recently started a Master’s in Film and Visual studies here at Queen’s. I was being taught the importance of specializing, honing your skills and refining your creative practice. However, this approach seemed at odds with a new way of thinking that I was experiencing through the ‘Adventures’. Thinking outside the box, looking at a problem from different angles and with the sense that no medium was out of the question.

The first adventure took the form of a creative writing workshop; this presented numerous challenges to me. Having always been a practice-based filmmaker, I had never found a strength in writing, and even less so in performing. Despite these reservations, by the end of the weekend we had written a script, performed it to camera, and edited it in a matter of hours. If fact, we did not even have time to review the edit before presenting it. The unexpected result: a moving and powerful short drama piece.

While I was being taught through my Masters to plan, prepare and rehearse; I found an amazing result achieved through improvisation, spontaneity, and team effort. Though I found my Master’s work extremely reassuring, I felt completely liberated through the interdisciplinary work, so I began to keep a video diary to log my thoughts and impressions after an adventure:

“It’s amazing what can come together with such little time but with a lot of effort”. 
The following Adventure weekend held at the Sonic Arts Research Centre raised a whole new issue; how do I go about producing sonic art when I have never played an instrument? However, this apprehension soon faded when I approached the task of producing a live electronic performance by applying my knowledge of software packages and taking the role of a live composer; producing effects in real time to generate a layered live performance. The significance of this work is revealed in my second diary entry:

“Sound was something that I really wanted to get covered… and I feel I’ve now covered it in a big way”.

I soon discovered that the key to successfully bridging the gap between these two academic worlds was to approach new challenges with what I knew, and find out what I can learn to benefit my own creative practice.

Reflecting upon my experience I ask; can creative professionals keep their options open, experiment with different media and collaborate in new and unexpected ways? Or do you become a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none? For me the experience has taught me the importance of continuing to develop my skills as filmmaker but also the significant rewards that can come from collaboration. I would propose that these seemingly conflicting interests can work in tandem and I suggest that it can be the same for all filmmakers that are open to it:

“If they are all as successful as this first adventure weekend has been, I think I will come out of it next March with a wealth of experience”.

CMI
Feigned disinterest is a rusty coat of armour. Cumbersome and reassuring and utterly useless for swimming. For 2 years I went to University in a place with a famous name called London. Some cities suck you in for a bit, chew your armour up and spit you out after a while and you're a little smaller, like a half-done Werther’s Original. I moved back to Belfast in September 2005. It was sunny and warm in the autumn, which, like everything in Belfast, was a pleasant if unsettling surprise. Autumn shouldn’t be warm and sunny - just like summer shouldn’t be icy and overcast. I was only 9 inches tall and armourless. I floated over the water in a paper cup and landed on the beach where I crawled up the sand, tired and salty, and back into the little box I grew up in.

It’s liberating being a very small person, except for when it rains in big fat rain drops. Also, finding shoes that fit is a problem. But the good thing about being 9 inches tall is how you start to pay more attention to the little things. You notice small movements, activities, people walking in and out of rooms you never realized were there when you were medium-sized. And you see little people with big ideas.

There were rooms in buildings on streets in Belfast that I had never been in to. For example, there is a post-graduate centre with a secret code where people of various shapes and sizes gather. Where, with nothing more than the power of their minds and the aide of endless streams of jaffa cakes and tea, they concoct, create and confound in equal measures.
How does it feel? It was a wintry cold Belfast weekend when the good people at the Sonic Arts Research Centre let us in through the doors and allowed us free rein to play with all their expensive kit. We chopped up Bob Dylan lyrics into a weird whirlygig thing that I didn’t really understand. To be on your own? The oddest experience of my life, as I hid at the back of a stage like a complete unknown and pretended it wasn’t my idea to loop a sample of one of us singing the chorus to ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ backwards till it resembled some spooky witch chant – appropriate for the season I thought. No direction home.

A few weeks later, I was retelling the story through a makeshift puppet show, to an audience who were expecting a carnival on the theme of ‘time’. Times past, times redefined. Women became snails. Poems became films became scary things. My story was of two people from a past civilization, a man and a woman, Ivan and Iris, two people with a past. They fell asleep one day in big cold world, slept and missed the heating of the earth, the rise of ancient civilizations, the warming of the polar ice caps and the destruction in flames of all the past, all the present and all records for the future.

There is no moment when you wake up drowsy one day from a shit time in your life and say you have been moulded and found your form. But maybe, one time, you can be lucky and wake up before your time - and find yourself a little person in a big world, full of knots and tangles. And maybe, just maybe you’ll find something there just like you; little, untangled and bigger than raindrops.

WM
Adventures in Interdisciplinarity became part of the new interdisciplinary MA pathways which were launched in September 2007 by the Centre for Excellence in the Creative and Performing Arts (CECPA) at Queen’s University.

Two new groups of travellers have since embarked on their own series of Adventures. While entirely different in content from those in the trial module, these will build on, and develop further, the pedagogic approach exemplified through the stories in this collection.

There will be many more stories to tell, stories of new challenges, new discoveries, new skills, new meanings, new insights. The absolute rigour and absolute fun will continue – the transformative power of this approach to learning will endure and grow.

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”
(Eliot, 1942).

Sarah Marshall
January 2009


